

Conclusion: Marx's Educational Legacy

Marx had a good deal to say about the schooling of his time. Most of his observations refer to England, although he also made occasional judgments on other school systems, such as New England (favourably) and Prussia (unfavourably). He was writing in the period when modern systems of state education were taking on the form which, by and large, they were to maintain throughout the following century. This final chapter will consider that further history in the light of both Marx's general ideas about education and his programmes for schooling.

Marx did not make predictions about schools within capitalist society. When he speaks of 'the education of the future', he is postulating a social revolution which has overthrown the ruling class, and set in motion the process of transformation outlined in *The Communist Manifesto*. History has taken a different course in the most developed countries, however, and their 'education of the future' is not likely to be anything like a socialist one. Instead it is bound up with later versions of capitalism which Marx did not foresee, and which pose various problems for his economic and social theories.

There is another aspect to this reality. In Western societies, education is both a public concern and the object of study by empirical researchers and theoretical scholars. Its history since Marx is also one of ideas, in continual interaction with the changing nature of schooling. The progressive and radical streams of educational thought have offered more or less sharp criticisms of the existing system, as well as strategies for action by teachers and others for improvement. This concluding discussion will look at some uses of Marxian ideas in debate and controversy over education in capitalist societies. Western Marxism, unconstrained by any official status, has demonstrated the ability of Marx's ideas to lead interpreters in different directions. While my survey here will be both brief and fairly selective, it will show that this openness to theoretical development has made possible new insights into what really happens in our schools.

Progressive Education

The twentieth-century tradition of progressive education developed with little or no debt to Marx. Its leading theorist, John Dewey, owed most to the pragmatist school of C.S. Peirce and William James. His 'child-centred approach' to education, formulated at the end of the nineteenth century,

encouraged a breaking down of traditional subject divisions within the curriculum, and an emphasis on learning through activity rather than direct instruction. Underlying Dewey's pedagogy was a remarkably radical epistemology. Although he had been a follower of Hegelian idealism (in its American version) as a young scholar, his mature thought found its main sources in scientific psychology and in the biological theory of evolution. With this backing, Dewey was able to present a strongly naturalistic approach to human development. Learning is understood as a continuing process of practical interaction with the environment, through which the living organism adapts to circumstances and develops its capacities to organize experience in successful ways. Accordingly Dewey renounces the traditional 'quest for certainty' in favour of a conception of knowledge as always fallible and provisional, subject to continual revision and growth. Even the logical forms of thought, so often accorded a privileged status, are to be assessed by their success or failure in guiding action. Dewey's 'instrumentalism' has direct implications for education: since learning occurs only in active involvement with aspects of the real environment, children must be given opportunities to encounter and solve whatever concrete problems engage their attention and interest. Hence the progressivist classroom, with its flexible organization, encouragement of cooperation and reliance on practical 'projects'.

Marxists have tended to classify pragmatism as a bourgeois philosophy. Typical of this (not always very sophisticated) line is the assertion of one Marxist writer on education that 'Pragmatism stripped of all its technicality was regarded by James and Dewey as a method for achieving social stability' (Gonzalez, 1982, p.187). Yet within that philosophical 'technicality' there are certain affinities between pragmatism and if not Marx, then at least Engels, whose attempt at a comprehensive philosophy included a strong emphasis on practice as a component of genuine knowledge. Like Dewey, Engels was much influenced by the Darwinian theory of evolution. Human beings are a part of the natural world, and both their mental and their physical abilities have developed as instruments enabling them to survive and reproduce within their environment. This implies an epistemology oriented towards practical activity, foreshadowed by Marx in the second of his Theses on Feuerbach (CW5:6). 'The most telling refutation' of the scepticism of Hume and Kant, according to Engels, 'is practice, namely, experimentation and industry'. We prove the validity of our ideas about a natural phenomenon 'by bringing it about ourselves, producing it out of its conditions and making it serve our purposes into the bargain' (CW26:367). Having said this, Engels adds that knowledge is always limited and provisional. Whatever we take to be true will turn out to have some false aspect when put to the test of further practice. We must therefore give up 'the demand for final solutions and eternal truth' (ibid.:384) and content ourselves with a never-ending approximation to the unattainable ideal of absolute knowledge.

One might see Engels as a kind of pragmatist, with a bias towards realism, but for two other aspects of his philosophy. One is a dogmatic materialism, an

inspiration for Lenin's later denunciation of tendencies towards pragmatism and positivism amongst Russian Marxists as 'idealism'. The second feature of Engels' thought in conflict with his pragmatist tendency is a preoccupation with Hegelian dialectic, which he turns into quasi-Newtonian universal 'laws of nature', allegedly reached through inductive generalization, but looking far more like axiomatic principles. Much of the blame for this notion lies with the contemporary writer Eugen Dühring, whose 'philosophy of reality' relied on propositions such as the 'law of definite number', expressing the conditions for gaining knowledge but applying to reality as well (see Small, 1998). Engels opposed Dühring but apparently felt that he needed 'laws' of his own. The tensions between these disparate elements were managed only by virtue of the official position of dialectical materialism in socialist states. In the long run, what Marx and Engels condescendingly called 'vulgar materialism' has proved far more durable than its 'dialectical' counterpart. Again the later 'praxis' tradition in Marxism was oriented towards social and political activism, a very different kind of practice from scientific methodology. One of its leading exponents, Georg Lukács, even suggested that 'In fact, scientific experimentation is contemplation at its purest' (Lukács, 1971, p.132). But the appeal of aspects of progressivism to Russian educationalists in the 1920s was hardly a coincidence: it arose from the genuine affinities between pragmatist themes and the Marxist philosophical outlook of Engels.

The progressive educators were also social progressives. Indeed one of their original reasons for urging school reform was a belief in the power of education to change society. They considered that the school had failed to keep up with the rapid changes of an expanding and industrializing society. Since habits of participation and cooperation formed in childhood would be transferred into the wider social sphere in adult life, educational reform provided a means for realizing the aspirations of a democratic nation in a modern age. Again John Dewey is a representative figure. His politics were liberal and reformist, based on ideals of practical rationality and social justice rather than a struggle for supremacy between social classes. Dewey was open to dialogue with Marxian socialists, but rejected what he saw as their policy of using force (which he took to imply violence) in achieving political change. He continued to place his faith, if not in existing institutions just as they were, then in the spirit and methods of scientific intelligence which would, if given the chance, resolve social issues in the interests of the democratic majority.

Dewey had seen socialist education at first hand, visiting Russia in 1928 with a group of American educators on a guided tour of schools in Leningrad and Moscow. On returning to the United States, he reported favourably on his impressions, praising 'the marvellous development of progressive educational ideas and practice under the fostering care of the Bolshevik government' (Dewey, 1981–8, vol.3, p.227). He noted with particular satisfaction the presence of an American influence in Soviet schools, most evident in their use of the 'project method', adapted to the stronger social and political orientation of a socialist curriculum. Back home, Dewey was soon coming out against a

Marxist tendency within progressive education. In view of Marx's dismissive comments on the progressives of his time, it is remarkable that there should have been any such influence. In fact, the political side of progressivism was always open to this possibility, although it was not brought into reality until the Great Depression of the 1930s, which exposed and intensified class divisions in Western societies. The reformers were now faced with a new situation: not the rapid economic growth and mass immigration of the period within which their ideas had originally been devised, but a crisis calling into question the basis of the social system.

In his 1932 pamphlet, *Dare the School Build A New Social Order?*, the Columbia educationalist George S. Counts drew on Marxian ideas to make an ambitious claim for the contribution of education to social reconstruction. Capitalism had failed, he argued, not just morally, but even in its own pragmatic economic terms. The schools, representing no single class but the common interest, were well placed to contribute to its replacement by a system based on social control of production. However the existing form of progressive education, with its 'inordinate emphasis on the child and child interests', was too oriented towards the liberal-minded middle class (Counts, 1969, p.8). Counts recommended a far more assertive role for the educator. Teachers, he said, 'should deliberately reach for power' (ibid., p.28). Only by assuming leadership responsibilities in the school and community could they realize the commitment of education to social democracy.

Counts' passionate manifesto sparked off lively disputes amongst the progressives. Typical was a debate which appeared in *The Social Frontier*, the organ of the radical educators, between those who wanted to use the class struggle in educational action and their sceptical colleagues. Theodore B. Brameld urged that teachers 'need to move much farther in the direction of "class consciousness"' and to 'influence their students, subtly if necessary, frankly if possible, toward acceptance of the same position' (Brameld, 1935, pp.55–6). Dewey, a regular contributor to *The Social Frontier*, responded by reaffirming the values of liberal reformism. He expressed a strong suspicion (perhaps supported by his Russian experience) that the socialist agenda would mean a return to teacher authority, and even the introduction of political indoctrination into the classroom, as some of the Marxists seemed to be conceding. Drawing on his empiricist philosophy, Dewey invoked the traditional distinction between fact and value to argue that a recognition of the reality of social divisions did not, of itself, justify commitment to a strategy of class warfare (Dewey, 1936, p.242).

With the onset of the Cold War in the mid-century, Marx's ideas were largely excluded from public discourse in Western countries. Both East and West were content to consider dialectical materialism and Stalinism as the sole heirs of the Marxian tradition. However the rediscovery of the young Marx in the 1960s, and especially the publication of his 1844 *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts*, coincided with the reappearance of radical streams of thought within Western culture. Marx was now seen as a

humanist thinker, and his concept of alienation was linked with the themes of existentialism and other current trends of thought which focused on the plight of the isolated individual in a mass society. Promoted in the English-speaking world by popularizers such as the psychologist Erich Fromm, Marx figured within an eclectic mixture of alternative philosophies, providing a political dimension to what would otherwise have remained a fairly self-directed set of concerns.

Yet discords between humanistic progressivism and a political orientation related to Marxism remained as inevitable as forty years earlier. Jonathan Kozol's (1972) *Free Schools* refers to liberal school reformers and followers of A.S. Neill with a hostility which recalls Marx's comments on 'the Basedows and their modern imitators', and makes essentially the same charge of triviality and irrelevance: 'Harlem does not need a new generation of radical basket-weavers' (ibid., p.45). Kozol emphasized basic survival skills for children living within a harsh and hostile urban environment, and took a pragmatic view of the strategies required to provide them with the formal schooling they needed. However his preference for disengagement from state-run education ('The school that flies the flag is, in the long run ... *accountable to that flag*') represents a minority viewpoint within the Marxian stream of radicalism. The independent 'charter schools' which later spread in the United States had a very different meaning, visible in their strongly academic objectives and in their middle-class sources of support. The inner-city projects held up as a model by Kozol have remained a marginal phenomenon, for all their genuine achievements.

For better or worse, then, radical educators are concerned with the reality of public education, both in their theorizing and in their practical efforts to promote whatever democratic and egalitarian possibilities are available for education. With this in mind, the rest of my discussion of later developments will focus on Marxian approaches to the public school within a modern class society.

Schooling as an 'Ideological State Apparatus'

One of the most important applications of the concept of ideology to twentieth-century education occurs in the work of the French Marxist Louis Althusser (and of an allied writer, Nicos Poulantzas). In an influential essay, Althusser applies his interpretation of ideology to the case of education (Althusser, 1971b). He begins by dividing the state as it exists within modern society into two different kinds of institution. What he calls the 'repressive state apparatus' is the legal and governmental structure which maintains existing social relations through force in a more or less direct way. On the other hand, the 'ideological state apparatus' is a less unified collection of structures: the family, the churches, the education system, political parties, trade unions, communications and cultural bodies. Whereas some of these do

have repressive functions, Althusser argues that those are ‘very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic’ (ibid., p.138). Instead their function is to support the ideology of the ruling class. This is not a marginal activity: Althusser claims that it amounts to the main work of reproducing the social relations of production, under the protection of its repressive counterpart (ibid., p.142). And, within this apparatus, the school is of central importance, at least in modern society, where it has taken over the functions once carried out by the church and, to some extent, the family. The school takes in all children and divides them into groups which correspond to the positions available in a class society: some are directed into manual labour, others into technical labour, management or a profession. In each case, the school imposes the set of values, abilities and traits that reinforce the outcome. At the same time, it presents itself as a neutral agency which maintains a deep respect for the individual personality of every child receiving an education. Althusser calls this image the ‘universally reigning ideology of the school’ (ibid., p.148).

To understand what Althusser means by ‘ideology’, however, we must look at the theory of knowledge which he claims to be implicit in Marx. In this interpretation, knowledge is no longer attributed to an individual subject, but is explained in terms of a process of production whose origin is not located in any ‘subject’. The process through which knowledge comes about is called ‘theoretical practice’: ‘All the levels of social existence are the sites of distinct practices: economic practice, political practice, ideological practice, technical practice and scientific (or theoretical) practice’ (Althusser and Balibar, 1971, p.58). Each of these can be seen as a kind of production, implying a process in which some object is transformed. In the case of theoretical practice, it is a conceptual object which is turned into a new object through the set of concepts and methods of thinking that Althusser terms a ‘problematic’. In his account, this is the most important element in a theory, and the crucial factor in determining what takes place, for it determines what object is taken up in theoretical production, what questions can be asked about the object, and what methods are used in answering them. In contrast, Althusser emphasizes the relative unimportance of the individual person in the production of knowledge. He describes a problematic as a ‘theoretical structure in which the “subject” plays, not the part it believes it is playing but the part which is assigned to it by the mechanism of the process’ (ibid., p.27). Clearly, in this situation, it is the problematic which is in control. Further what is essential to scientific knowledge is that the mechanism of theory be allowed to work without interference. Other kinds of practice must not influence the process. Where that does take place, and the autonomy of theoretical practice is compromised by external interests, the outcome will be ideology rather than knowledge (ibid., p.52).

The use of the word ‘mechanism’ is significant. On this account, the problematic is not really a tool or instrument in the usual sense, but more like a machine. The use of a tool requires qualities such as strength, speed

and, above all, skill. Machinery's elimination of this requirement is also an elimination of individual autonomy and responsibility. The process of production has been taken over by the machine. As Marx puts it, the machine uses the worker rather than the worker using the machine. Now all this seems to apply to Althusser's account of theoretical production. His attitude is very different from that of Marx, who objects to any attempt to make knowledge independent from human thinking. Marx writes: 'For Herr Bauer, as for Hegel, truth is an *automaton* that proves itself. Man must *follow* it' (CW4:79). The remark is part of a polemic against an idealism which applies not just to philosophy but also to historical development. Hence Marx's further comment: 'That is why *history*, like *truth*, becomes a person apart, a metaphysical subject of which the real human individuals are merely the bearers.' Althusser would comment that such remarks belong to an early period in the development of Marx's thinking, and that his mature works achieve a new scientific outlook in which the relations of production are the basis of historical development. These in fact constitute the only real subject of the process. Or rather, since relations 'cannot be thought within the category *subject*' (Althusser and Balibar, 1971, p.180), we must think of history as a process *without* a subject. In this interpretation, human beings figure only as the 'bearers' (Althusser's term) of social relations. He does suggest that this holds true for our particular society because its social relations are antagonistic ones; presumably the same point would apply to older societies as well (Althusser, 1971a, pp.202–4), yet no such specification is made in his account of theoretical production. Instead the absence of the subject is simply presented as a universal rule.

One of Marx's complaints against idealism is that it leaves us without any real function in the making of either knowledge or history, which he says 'exists in order to serve for the act of consumption of theoretical eating – *proving*' (CW4:79). But I think it would be unfair to impose this pattern on Althusser's argument. His motive is a different one, and in a way it is quite the opposite. He says of his theory: 'Its first effect was, *in opposition to all forms of pragmatism*, to justify the relative autonomy of theory' (Althusser, 1971a, p.169). That is, he wants to secure the independence of theoretical practice from all other forms of practice (political activity, material production, and so on). The reference of the various forms of practice back to a common source in the individual person would, it seems, compromise their autonomy. For theoretical practice it could lead to an intrusion of interests and needs from elsewhere, but the ability of scientific thinking to supply its own criterion of validity is precisely what, in Althusser's view, distinguishes it from ideology.

This elimination of the individual does rule out any notion of 'socialist humanism'. Althusser writes: 'The concept "socialism" is indeed a scientific concept, but the concept "humanism" is no more than an *ideological* one' (Althusser, 1969, p.223). The reason, he argues, is that it carries with it a false picture of the individual person as a 'subject', with all the implications of this concept: autonomy, responsibility and the notion of 'man' as the 'measure

of all things'. The idea of 'human nature' is a related one, which Althusser equally dismisses from any sound interpretation of Marxism. Because of this, he insists on a sharp distinction between the early thought of Marx and his mature work. Marx began, he explains, as a follower of the theoretical humanism of his time. In the 1845 Theses on Feuerbach, however, Marx achieved a radical break with the humanist approach to history and politics. As one might expect, Althusser singles out for special commendation the sixth Thesis, with its attack on the idea of a universal human essence. In place of this idea, he argues, Marx's new approach was based on new categories: the forces and relations of production, the social base and superstructure, and so on. Althusser calls this outcome 'Marx's theoretical anti-humanism' (Althusser, 1969, p.229). The true subjects in his view are not human beings, but rather structures, or sets of relations. History is not the work of men and women, as suggested by the early Marx, but rather of *classes*. Much the same seems to apply to knowledge; and this suggests an approach to education equally concerned to avoid any reliance on such categories.

Some of Althusser's observations about the role of schooling in reproducing social relations are expressed in similar ways by other writers. What makes his approach of interest is the link between this picture and his theory of ideology. Later, in his essay on 'ideological state apparatuses', he returns to the theme of the 'subject'. Althusser's opposition to any use of this category is such that he refuses to see ideology as having anything to do with 'ideas' or 'representations', for these would be understood as located in the 'consciousness' of some subject (Althusser, 1971b, pp.155–6). Rather ideology is a kind of practice, manifested in actual behaviour. Habits and rituals which are determined by some ideological apparatus constitute the practice in which ideology is to be found. What kinds of habits and rituals? Althusser's answer is: those which encourage us to see ourselves as subjects, which confirm and reinforce our unspoken conviction that we are unique and irreplaceable individuals and that it is out of this individuality that our thinking and acting arise (ibid., pp.160–5). It is a disappointing feature of his discussion that it concludes with a treatment of religion rather than returning to the theme of education, which was after all claimed to be a far more important source of ideology in modern society.

Althusser's interpretation of Marx is firmly based on such works as *Capital*. One can hardly quarrel with this choice. It is certainly true that a disproportionate amount of attention was paid to the early writings of Marx in the years after their eventual publication, often by commentators who failed to perceive that *Capital* contains as many philosophical themes as these works, if not more. Althusser's reaction against this emphasis is rather drastic: in his view, even *The German Ideology* comes under suspicion for its 'ambiguous' relation to the humanist past from which Marx was breaking away (Althusser, 1969, p.34). Furthermore Althusser's approach to the mature writings is based on the assumption that they contain a single system of thought, a system of which Marx himself was not fully aware, and which can therefore

be discovered only by reading between the lines. His emphasis on structures leads to a Marxist approach to schooling which is very different from any 'humanistic' standpoint. By the same token, it is marked by a relentlessly abstract character: this schematic picture is a very long way from concrete experiences of schooling, and it is hard to identify the actual processes that presumably occur from day to day and bring about the effects described. I do not believe one could make this criticism of Marx's *Capital*, where a great deal of vivid factual material is skilfully integrated with the economic analysis. Moreover other writers have not dismissed the ideas in Marx's early writings as incompatible with his later work, and we may turn to some who have revived the tradition of political economy in relation to education in a way that supplies what is missing in writers like Althusser and Poulantzas.

Political Economy of Education

Economic categories sometimes apply quite readily to education. For example, the notion of 'cultural capital', due to the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, deploys a Marxian analogy to show that knowledge becomes an economic force in the hands of those who are able to gain and deploy access to education, and especially the kinds of knowledge that are linked with social power (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Within the school, children from different backgrounds are apparently given the same opportunities, yet the differences in cultural capital that they bring with them soon reproduce existing social divisions. However a political economy of education does not content itself with analogies, but aims at integrating an account of schooling practices with a broader picture of society and, in particular, of the forms and relations of production.

The 'neo-Marxist' revival of a political economy of education may be said to begin with the work of Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis. Their *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) was deeply influenced by Marxism, although its standpoint was characterized as 'democratic' rather than 'socialist'. Bowles and Gintis's approach also owed a considerable (though implicit) debt to functionalist social theory, typified in Talcott Parsons' analysis of the American schoolroom. For Parsons, the school is an agent of socialization, carrying out the process 'by which persons select and are selected for categories of roles' (Parsons, 1959, p.300). The most basic division carried out within the school, he explains, 'will broadly be on the basis, on the one hand, of identification with the teacher, or acceptance of her role as a model; and, on the other, of identification with the pupil peer group' (ibid., p.307). The students classified as 'successful' by the school are, not surprisingly, those who have taken over the patterns of behaviour typified by teachers and administrators. A similar picture was elaborated at greater length by the social psychologist Robert Dreeben, who argued that what children learn in school is not just the knowledge and skills of the explicit curriculum but, just as

importantly, a set of *norms* or principles of conduct. He named the most important of these as ‘independence’ (acting by oneself and taking personal responsibility), ‘achievement’ (meeting given standards of excellence), ‘universalism’ (respecting the expectations of others) and ‘specificity’ (accepting the limited character of social roles) (Dreeben, 1968, pp.63–4). Dreeben concluded that ‘Schooling, occupation, and politics, at least in the United States, are reasonably well integrated with one another in the sense that related institutions create similar demands on persons who participate in them’ (ibid., p.145).

The functionalist model is one of a system apparently running smoothly enough on its own terms, apart from the odd case of ‘deviance’, which it has ways of dealing with. Bowles and Gintis introduced a new element into the picture: competing class interests and conflicts over power, not just accidental but intrinsic to the structure itself. Moreover they were concerned not with the individual ‘role’ but with the position of social groups, and with overall processes rather than particular incidents. This is, of course, in line with Marx’s strategy for overcoming the ideological effects of a partial and short-term perspective: only the totality reveals the real nature of what is immediately observed. What follows is that much of what happens within the classroom cannot be understood unless one goes beyond that location to the school as a whole, and in turn to the broader social context.

In doing this, Bowles and Gintis formulated what they called a ‘correspondence principle’, which added further content to the simple notion of an economic determination of the social ‘superstructure’ by postulating a systematic parallel between features of the school and the workplace in a capitalist society:

Specifically, the relationships of authority and control between administrators and teachers, teachers and students, students and students, and students and their work replicate the hierarchical division of labour which dominates the work place. Power is organised along vertical lines of authority under administration to faculty to student body; students have a degree of control over their curriculum comparable to that of the worker over his job. (Bowles and Gintis, 1976, p.12)

Moreover, Bowles and Gintis argued, the alienation of workers who sell their labour power for external reward is mirrored in the motivation of school work by teacher-assigned grades and, at the same time, by a threat of failure similar to the threat of unemployment experienced by workers. Competition rather than cooperation amongst students corresponds to the suppression of solidarity in the labour market, while many aspects of the daily organization of the school closely resemble those of the office or factory: students trained to follow the timetable, for example, are well prepared for later work schedules. As for the school curriculum, the fragmentation and compartmentalization of officially recognized knowledge follow the model of manufacture and industry, with their successful rationalization of the processes of material

production. In supporting all these assertions, Bowles and Gintis were forced to claim that progressive education had never been introduced into American schooling ('It would be a good idea') (ibid., p.44). As a historical proposition, this is debatable, to say the least, and it highlights the one-dimensional character of their portrayal of the American school. It is perhaps just as well that, while Bowles and Gintis suggested the American family as another example of the 'correspondence principle', they did not explore that idea further.

One important part of Bowles and Gintis's work was an analysis of intelligence testing and the streaming policies that it supported and justified. The real target of their criticism was the 'meritocratic' ideology of schooling: that is, the claim that schools exist to provide children with an opportunity to develop their individual talents. By selecting children of high intellectual ability for further education (hence the legitimacy of intelligence testing) schools were supposed to benefit both those individuals and society as a whole. A meritocratic education really makes sense only within a meritocratic society; that is, one in which economic success is a function of developed talent and, in principle, nothing else. However Bowles and Gintis analysed the language of academic selection to argue that, on the contrary, its use of terms such as 'reasonable', 'practical' and 'responsible' referred primarily to personality traits which had little to do with cognitive ability, but matched the requirements of a hierarchical division of labour. Motivation, discipline and conformity were rewarded in these practices, while creativity, assertiveness and independence were penalized. Intelligence testing, they concluded, was in reality just another instance of the 'correspondence principle'.

The work of Bowles and Gintis came as a breakthrough in the critique of schooling in Western societies, because it reasserted in a dramatic way the links of education with social life. By no means all readers were convinced by the 'correspondence principle', though. Some critics on the left charged that this, taken as the sole or even the main explanation of the schooling process, amounted to a 'deterministic' or 'economistic' position, in that it treated what happens in school as the passive effect of processes elsewhere in society, lacking any causal power of its own. In practical terms, this was an idea that discouraged educators hoping for something better, since it implied that educational reform within existing society was either impossible or without any effect beyond the school itself. Either way left reformers with few prospects short of an increasingly unlikely transformation of society as a whole.

In order to find an alternative model, researchers investigated the forces within schooling which might give it some claims to autonomy. They argued that the school setting is far more complex than claimed by the correspondence principle. While it is true that the powerful influence of the social status quo is prevalent, especially at the official level, there are also countervailing forces. The students whom Parsons identified as defining themselves through their peer group rather than the official school culture

were the subject of Paul Willis's influential study *Learning to Labour* (Willis, 1977). Willis's theme was identified in his subtitle: 'How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs'. He argued that the peer group of working-class boys had its own cultural values, largely revolving round an aggressive assertion of masculinity supported by various prejudices and hostilities, especially over sex and race. It was on the basis of these that they rejected the aims and values of the school. While still in the school, the 'lads' created zones within which their own 'counter-school culture' could prevail, and then left as soon as they could. The message of the book was ironic: the genuine insights present in the 'counter school culture' led not to a better alternative, but to short-term satisfactions and long-term failure. These boys entered unskilled manual work, rewarded by the weekly pay packet but offering few prospects in life. Willis concluded sadly that their resistance was at the same time a surrender to the status quo and a 'yielding of hope' for anything better (ibid., p.109).

Thomas Mann once drew attention to the 'strange, deep satisfaction' found by many readers in the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer (Mann, 1939, p.9). He suggested that the doctrine, if expressed with sufficient eloquence, is not depressing – that, on the contrary, it makes 'all of us feel what amounts almost to triumph at being thus avenged by the heroic word'. Yet this is not an appealing thought for anyone committed to activity in the social and historical world. Hence the Marxian tradition is usually optimistic, and at heart retains the Enlightenment faith in progress. Willis recommended that teachers could learn the language of working-class youth and take their cultural attitudes as texts for class work, in order to encourage critical self-awareness. But he advised teachers not to abdicate their institutional authority in favour of some radical teaching style, and to 'avoid any simplistic expression of sympathy' with the 'lads' (Willis, 1977, p.190). That is perhaps better than nothing, but more positive still has been the contribution of later Marxian writers on education who focus on cultural as well as economic factors. Some of these writers have opened up new paths towards reform in education, even in the face of renewed intrusions of social power into schooling in Western countries.

The Cultural Approach

A major inspiration for the cultural approach to education is the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, whose notebooks and letters, written while he was a prisoner of the Fascist regime in Italy, contain many thoughtful passages on education. In part provoked by changes in Italian schooling introduced in 1923 by the Fascist Minister of Public Instruction, the idealist philosopher Giovanni Gentile, Gramsci draws attention to some of the ambiguities of progressivism in education: for instance, suggesting that a playing down of formal instruction might open the way to harmful ideological, moral and political influences. Gramsci points out advantages to working-class children

in features of traditional education. He suggests that self-discipline is an advantage both to the individual and to the group that needs to organize itself in order to transform society. He writes: 'In education one is dealing with children in whom one has to inculcate certain habits of diligence, precision, poise (even physical poise), ability to concentrate on specific subjects, which cannot be acquired without the mechanical repetition of disciplined and methodical acts' (Gramsci, 1971, p.37). Only in this way, Gramsci adds, can one produce the true scholar 'who is able to sit for sixteen hours on end at his work-table'.

In these writings, Gramsci disagrees strongly with those socialists who accept a policy of vocational education in the name of modernization (*ibid.*, p.40). A purely technical schooling for working-class children, he argues, effectively cuts them off from the heritage of humanistic culture, turning it into the exclusive property of the middle and upper classes. Instead the schooling of working-class children should be comprehensive, including skills in formal study which prepare them for the struggle to improve the situation of their social class. Gramsci does not refer here to Marx's ideas on the curriculum: his observations are occasioned by the contemporary situation of Italian education, but they follow quite similar lines. Both writers interpret the notion of the 'needs of the child' in terms of the historical situation of a particular social class, and draw what they see as the appropriate consequences for education.

Gramsci's real influence on educational thought, however, is to be found more indirectly, through his notion of 'hegemony', a major innovation within Marxist theory, for which he acknowledged some debt both to Lenin and to Benedetto Croce. 'Hegemony' is a form of social control which operates, not through the apparatus of law enforcement, but through the mass media, the vocabulary of public discourse, social customs and organizations such as trade unions, political parties and educational institutions. Gramsci suggests that a ruling class exercises its power over society, not simply by open coercion, but also by gaining the consent of other classes to its exercise of authority and claims to legitimacy. Schools are crucial agents of cultural hegemony, since they prepare children to accept in advance the culture they will experience as adults. Gramsci was deeply suspicious of 'common sense' as a taking-for-granted of existing social relations, presenting them as the 'natural' and inevitable order of things. The task of undermining this hegemony, he considered, required 'intellectuals': not in the traditional sense of an educated elite, but rather of activists working within communities at the grass-roots level, an idea similar in some ways to the later pedagogy of Paulo Freire. Such a programme of adult education would lead towards the achievement of a 'counter-hegemony' by the working class, asserting its right to leadership even before the actual attainment of political power (*ibid.*, pp.57–8).

Some of the most incisive applications of this concept of cultural hegemony to education occur in the work of Michael W. Apple, which explores the

content of schooling within American society in concrete detail (see especially Apple, 1979, 1982b). Developed progressively in a series of books, Apple's model began with the concept of social reproduction through the school, but widened this in two ways: on the one hand, by taking in cultural as well as economic behaviour and, on the other, by recognizing complex tensions and conflicts. What gives his approach particular importance is its close attention to the concrete realities of school life. Looking inside the black box of the 'Ideological State Apparatus', he comes to novel conclusions. With Bowles and Gintis, as with Parsons, social 'roles' were taken to be ready-made scripts. In contrast, Apple argues that schools are places where cultural forms are not just transmitted but *produced* in the interactions between students, teachers and administrators. As Marx understood, ideology arises within everyday life, and the power of its explicit versions relies on an appeal to everyday experiences of living and working. Hence the notion that what happens in schools is straightforward indoctrination is an inadequate view: there may be such instances, but they do not amount to an overall picture.

A major contribution of this approach is its focus on the nature of teachers' work. Teachers are not simply the passive medium of social control, but have their own perspectives, ideas and interests. In one sense, the conflict between a centralized and a classroom-based approach to the curriculum is a fiction, since neither can be said to exist in a pure form. Yet it is along this polarity that perpetual negotiation and occasional open conflict take place within schools and school systems. As with other occupations, teaching has been much changed by the pursuit of progress which is, as Marx emphasized, an imperative of the capitalist mode of production. When handicrafts were replaced by manufacture, old skills became obsolete. The knowledge they embodied was taken over into the design of machines, and self-directed labour was replaced by the discipline of the factory system. Apple has pointed to striking parallels in reforms to the school curriculum which decrease the autonomy of the individual teacher. Many schools now use prepared curriculum packages which, by supplying learning objectives, classroom procedures and assessment methods, determine everything that takes place in the classroom. The unofficial use of expressions such as 'teacher-proof' for these materials is revealing. The decisions once made by teachers, well or badly according to their expertise, are built into the modules, and the teacher acts only as a floor supervisor. The collegiality of teachers becomes irrelevant, and pupils too tend to be isolated from one another, often in the name of 'individualized' learning.

Here we see not only 'deskilling' but its corollary, a loss of autonomy in the worker's daily activity. The process has a broader economic aspect. Education is itself a major industry and an important market for commercial interests. Sometimes these enter into the classroom directly, through the learning technologies which absorb a growing part of school funding, at the expense of staffing or other areas such as art and music. To an extent teachers can exercise resistance to these forces through the industrial power of their

unions, and by defending a school-based curriculum. However the politics of state education in recent decades has provided new opportunities for corporate intervention in schooling. A number of Western governments have set out to turn their schools into self-governing organizations which are largely responsible for obtaining as well as managing their funding. For instance, schools may seek sponsorships by corporations, in exchange for access to a ready-made body of consumers: that is, pupils and their families. Such moves are consistent with the policy, common to major political parties, of reducing the role of government in social services, health care and other branches of the 'welfare state'. For schools, one result is a convergence of the culture of education with that of commerce. Again there are consequences for teachers' work. Where schools are encouraged (or forced) to compete in the marketplace for 'customers', teachers at other schools are likely to be seen as rivals rather than colleagues, and then joint ventures and professional cooperation will be far less likely.

Another feature of this approach which recalls Marx is its attempt to unite theory with practice. Corresponding to this analysis of education is a programme of democratic reform which includes not just class but other forms of inequality (according to sex, race or ethnicity, for instance) that cannot be reduced to cases of economic class, even where there is a sizeable overlap. This is educational research with a political dimension; and here we must return to an earlier point. Since schooling in modern societies is mainly under the direct control of the state, the question of its nature and function is bound up with the issue of the state, a contested area within Marxian theory. Leninist orthodoxy rejected all attempts at reform within the existing system, insisting that the only solution was to 'smash' the existing state and replace it with a wholly new set of institutions. Yet Marx himself found *The Communist Manifesto's* notion of the modern state as 'a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie' (CW6:486) to be inadequate when he came to analyse actual political events, such as the rise of Louis Napoleon. He came to see political power as a complex struggle between factions within classes, not simply between classes as a whole. Some groups, he suggested, might even prefer to have others taking on the responsibilities of political rule (CW11:143). At the same time, the state was not wholly independent of society or, as Marx put it, 'suspended in mid-air' (ibid.:186). Economic interests remained the driving force, however ideological their expressions.

Engels took this picture further, in arguing that, in some historical circumstances, 'the warring classes balance each other so nearly that the state power, as ostensible mediator, acquires, for the moment, a considerable degree of independence of both' (CW26:271). Engels insists that this is an exceptional case, yet he names several contemporary instances, and it must be said that the political reality of liberal democracies in the present century is far more plausibly depicted by this model than by the 'committee' image. In a modern electoral system, no political party can be said to represent a single social class. The politics of education therefore involves all the pragmatic

features one might expect in sets of policies designed to appeal to different interest groups at the same time. As pointed out earlier, educational reformers are faced with the task of engaging in the politics of education: that is, of dealing with public debate over schooling, the formation of public opinion in and through the media, the strategies of education unions and lobby groups, the programmes of political parties and the shifting directions of government policy. The vocabulary of this discourse is seldom a Marxian one. Often it involves the interests of groups which seem to cut across social class according to sex, race, ethnicity, religion and other factors. The final section of this chapter will consider some aspects of the relation of Marxian ideas to these recent educational issues.

Postmodern Education?

Anyone reading *The Communist Manifesto* can hardly fail to notice that it begins with a celebration of capitalism in nearly every one of its aspects. In all of history, according to Marx and Engels, there has been only one social class which is truly revolutionary. 'The bourgeoisie cannot exist without continually revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society' (CW6:487). Its cultural form is modernity: that is, an abandonment of old traditions and social practices, along with the continual appearance of new styles in art, music, literature and architecture: 'All that is solid melts into air.' The contrast with older social formations is striking. Under capitalism, the special status enjoyed by placeholders within the feudal system of 'patriarchal relations' is replaced by the impersonal rationality of the marketplace. This levelling includes those occupations which are defined through professional education: 'The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers' (ibid.). Marx and Engels are far from condemning this historical process. They dismiss the satisfactions of the old system as 'philistine sentimentalism' and, in particular, welcome the demystification which places every occupation on the same basis.

In a strictly consistent market system, as its defenders point out, men and women would presumably be treated equally, while race and ethnicity would be irrelevant to one's prospects in society. On the other hand, it is often claimed that capitalism in fact requires, and therefore promotes, the persistence of various forms of discrimination. The most obvious example is the social division of labour according to sex, maintained – amongst other reasons – to preserve some version of the traditional family as an integral part of the social order. But other divisions are harder to account for along functional lines, unless as a way of dividing those subordinated groups who might otherwise unite to threaten the established system. An alternative view, of course, is that

capitalism is not to blame. The failure of socialist states to achieve more than a temporary suppression of ethnic rivalries and religious conflicts, despite using their resources of political power, education and official propaganda, is evidence that old habits die hard. In these cases, one might point to the special historical circumstances surrounding the end of communism to account for such regressions. What about the 'normal' situation in the capitalist democracies, though? How do we explain the complexities that a simple class analysis fails to take in? A different view is offered here: that our society has moved beyond the historical period of modernity about which Marx and Engels were writing, and that we need a new set of ideas to deal with social life and with education. In these final pages, we will briefly look at the challenge thus posed.

Certainly the emergence of identity politics based on gender, race, ethnicity and sexual preference presents a difficult problem for Marx's doctrines. Class solidarity is hard put to compete with these claims, and regularly comes off second best in practice, as any glance at current events will confirm. This actuality is reflected in the realm of ideas by an enormous growth of analyses and theories which focus on issues of *identity*. Within this literature, Marxian approaches are severely criticized for their primary emphasis on economic factors, and for their corresponding lack of attention to important and irreducibly non-economic realities. For all its commitment to human liberation, it is charged, Marxism failed to challenge the dominant ideology's denial of the 'lived' experiences of people whose subordinate status has long subjected them to being unseen, unheard and unacknowledged. Now any Marxist capable of self-criticism might accept this point and attempt to remedy the fault, while still upholding the same general framework of concepts. The outcome would be something like the recent contributions of Michael Apple or Henry Giroux. On the other hand, the possibility of finding a wholly new theory, rather than patching up an existing one, does have its own appeal, as well as offering its own rewards.

The 'postmodern' trend in recent thought is not at all easy to define. This elusiveness may simply be a hidden-position strategy, but it is also bound up with what postmodernists take to be the characteristic of the historical period which, they suggest, has succeeded the 'modern' period. Postmodernism is really in large part an account of modernity, as well as a destructive critique and rejection of its ideals. The picture drawn of Western culture over the period of the rise of capitalism emphasizes the displacement of traditional customs and beliefs by universal norms, embodying the authority of scientific knowledge and practical rationality. The theoretical exponents of modernity may have disagreed over the character of this global framework, but they did not doubt its necessity. According to their critics, however, such claims have always been a rationale for the domination of some groups over others: of males over females, of whites over non-whites and of European over non-European peoples, as well as embodying hubristic aspirations for human power over nature itself. This assertion is not just about the content of the

system (as in a Marxian analysis of ideology) but attacks the assumption that there must be some such 'truth' in the first place. What our present situation has exposed, it is argued, is that no 'grand narrative' can justify its claim to universal and exclusive validity. All such pretensions have been undermined by their own unacknowledged exclusions, which in the long run acted to bring them undone. The voices of silenced groups have exposed the partiality of a culture of domination, while the crisis of the environment challenges a traditional identification of scientific knowledge with human power and control.

Philosophically postmodernist thought invokes an epistemology (drawn and adapted from post-positivist philosophies of science) of conceptual 'paradigms' which are mutually incommensurable: that is, which share no common ground of accepted knowledge on the basis of which one could compare and decide between them in some objective way. In this situation, the assumption of a single 'narrative' (and in some candid versions, a single truth or reality) becomes unjustifiable. The kind of integrated theory and practice typified by Marxism, especially in the comprehensive, systematic form for which Engels was primarily responsible, appears here as an anachronism. Instead of claims to unity and universality, a play of differences and singularities is held up as the alternative – and, indeed, as the inevitable outcome of the failure of traditional metaphysical systems to live up to their own claims.

What the postmodernists say about society has important bearings upon education. Familiar controversies over the relations between school, work and the state are undermined by the assertion that these are no longer the factors that dominate people's lives. Becoming a member of this society, the argument runs, no longer means fitting into a position within the relations of production as a wage labourer or employer or self-employed professional. In contrast, it may mean being defined by the images of popular culture, which represent neither fixed 'positions' nor continuing 'roles' within a given social context, but rather vary and shift in their interactions with one another, not presupposing any underlying basis. What about the debate over the role of the state? According to postmodernist writers, the age of the centralized state is over. The failure of the command economies and downfall of the communist governments of Russia and Eastern Europe is a dramatic illustration of their thesis, but its main confirmation is to be sought in Western societies. It is not simply that the current political consensus favours a winding down of the welfare state and its corollary, the centrally organized system of public schooling, but also that other forces have already made their functions irrelevant.

In the case of the school, these forces are largely to be found in the marketplaces of popular culture. The notion of an 'official' knowledge which the school is charged with selecting, defining and imposing upon each new generation through its curriculum is challenged by the mass media. New technologies are used here in ways which frustrate rearguard attempts at

regulation and control. The best instance is the electronic Internet, which provides global access to information and misinformation alike, without any pretence of quality control. Facing such a *fait accompli*, the school may persevere with an endeavour to pass on both skills and attitudes relevant to the workplace, or it may content itself with concentrating on very general abilities, such as those associated with information technology.

Moreover schools must deal with other important social changes. In multicultural societies, they must face the demands of dealing with ethnic and religious groups, or with gay and lesbian youth. One common interpretation of this agenda simply adapts the standard justification of the modern school: every part of a community must have an equal opportunity to gain skills and qualifications for their future working lives. Yet the reality of such programmes is often more concerned with confirming identities which are found (or constructed) in the cultural marketplace as images whose validation by something outside themselves (for Marx, the material reality of the sphere of production) is not even an issue. Culturally, therefore, the idea of the school as a force for social unity, common to traditional and progressive educators, no longer applies. On the contrary, a mutual acknowledgment of difference is often held up as the goal to be achieved.

Karl Marx figures in the literature of postmodernism as one of the last, and even best, intellectual representatives of the historical period of modernity which is now over. There is a Marxian answer to this mixed compliment. It concedes that many features of the society of the early twenty-first century correspond to the postmodern analysis, but insists that social class and its effects remain a material reality, and a determining factor in education as elsewhere. It notes that many of the social changes emphasized by postmodernists seem to be quite local: for instance, the decline of manufacturing industry in comparison with information technologies in rich countries is usually just its relocation to poorer countries. When much of the world is still struggling to attain the social conditions of industrialized modernity, it is premature to celebrate a further step onwards. In any case, the difference between work and play, between the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom, is likely to remain an obstinate reality, as Marx commented on Fourier's Utopian fantasies. Of course, capitalist society is always changing, as Marx and Engels pointed out with emphasis. Hence no survey like this can claim to be the last word. All one can say is: Marx's ideas on education have proved to be highly fruitful in their application to an understanding of our society's modes of education. How far they will retain relevance in a new century of globalized change and development remains to be seen.



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